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ABSTRACT

Colleges are still designed for 18 to 22 year old students, even though that category includes only about 20% of the total population seeking degrees. Because of this fact, the term "andragogy," or how to teach adults, should become a more recognizable concept in education. A study was conducted in which 25 first-year adult women at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College in Terre Haute, Indiana, were asked to write down their thoughts and concerns as they worked on research papers, after they completed the paper, and after they had heard from the instructor about the papers. The same information was requested from 25 upper-level students. Comments were classified into either affective or cognitive. Several conclusions can be drawn from the data. First, the affective aspect of learning needs to be attended to with adult women students. Second, there was an apparent falling off of interest in the content of the paper after the students heard from instructors, who tended to comment heavily on composition techniques rather than on content. Numerous examples of student comments demonstrate the wide range of needs of adult learners, in both the affective and the cognitive modes. In comparing the first-year students' comments with the upper-level students' comments, a substantial rise in complexity of thought and ability to analyze was evident. Adult students, generally, are hard-working, motivated, appreciative, and usually quite good, so that teachers find working with them a gratifying experience. (Three tables of data are included.) (HB)

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# "So, You're a Woman, 38, Back in School, and Writing Research Papers?"

The College Board in its promotional materials for their conference on lifelong education notes that colleges are still designed for 18 to 22 year old students, even though that category now includes only about 20% of the total population seeking degrees. Since the numbers of adult students in college programs throughout the country continue to grow, "andragogy," how to teach adults, needs to become a more recongnizable concept in education. Yet, it is still not found in most dictionaries.

Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College outside Terre Haute, Indiana, has had a distance education program in operation since 1973 which addresses the needs of the returning adult, woman college student. I have taught composition to these students since 1975, without benefit of any organized theoretical "andragogy" pertaining to writing instruction. In the 1990s, some guidelines are available to help instructors deal effectively with the older student. I have done some data gathering myself with regard to the cognitive and affective responses of adult student writers working on documented papers. This paper will outline some current perspectives about adult learners, highlight the results of my research, and offer a few suggestions for andragogy in the writing course.

The guru of adult learning theory is Malcolm Knowles whose descriptions of older learners are well-known. He ascribes to

adults the qualities of self-directedness and independence. He notes that their experience is wide and useful and ought to be drawn upon. Adults are ready to learn because their dealings with the world have shown them the necessity of education and the knowledge they need to acquire. Motivation to learn is strong among adult students because of job and money pressures. Additionally, adults are interested in self-development and a better quality of life (Knowles, pp. 9-12). Knowles recommends that teachers should foster mutual respect, collaboration, trust, supportiveness, openness and authenticity, pleasure and humanness in their dealings with adult students (pp. 15-17).

Knowles represents a very positive viewpoint regarding adult learners. Other educators can be less upbeat. Greenwood discusses reentry women and the many deterrents they face: "time pressures and problems related to self-confidence, role definition, sense of direction, gender and age discrimination, lack of encouragement from the institution, and child care" (p. 133). Her study of a small number of reentry women singles out as problems their fear of failure as well as their low self-esteem. Greenwood acknowledges both their apprehension that they will not be able to learn and their feelings of guilt. She extols the composition instructor as someone who can give reentry women positive experiences to begin their college careers. She advises that these students be able to express themselves on a personal level in writing courses, since other types of writing are threatening to them. Giving them clear rules and prepared plans seems effective, she states. Finally, she recommends an atmosphere of trust, "formative evaluation in informal, one-to-one

conferencing" with the instructor, and peer review (p. 141).

While Greenwood's experience of reentry students seems to focus on negatives, Daloz writes with more optimism of adult learners, like Knowles, yet with some of the reservations of Greenwood. He views adult learners as fearful when they return to school, and he urges teachers to help these students overcome this fear and move forward. Women are most susceptible to this fear, says Daloz; they are more apt than men to sacrifice their studies to family obligations. Some of his recommendations include the following: "engender trust," "see the student's movement," "give the student a voice," "introduce conflict," "emphasize positive movement," and "keep one eye on the relationship" (pp. 125-127).

A similar middle-of-the-road position is offered by Bugbee who says that adults vary in their needs--some wanting a great deal of support and direction, while others are capable of "executive monitoring," able to guide themselves in academic matters. Bugbee suggests that instructors provide for the wide variety of needs which adult students have.

My own research on adult women students writing documented papers (often for the first time or for the first time in many years) resulted in agreement with Bugbee's belief that the needs of adult learners cover a wide range. I asked 25 first-year adult women students to write down their thoughts and concerns as they were drafting a research paper, after they completed the draft, and after they heard from their instructor about the draft. In addition, I requested the same information from 25

upper-level students who were writing a documented paper for and 400 level general studies course which used primary and secondary sources and expected integration of ideas. The resulting comments were gathered in units which numbered about a thousand. Not every student supplied every piece of the process, so the number of participants for a specific stage of the research varied between 16 and 23. The fact that these students are distance learners and are not in a classroom setting is worthy of note. The flow of communication between student and teacher was conducted in written format, through the mail.

The comments gathered were classified as either affective or cognitive. The affective comments were, obviously, positive or negative. The cognitive comments fell into two groups: strategies (methods the students would describe on how they proceeded to get the paper done) and "needs" or areas where they felt they were underprepared to write a research paper or where they felt they could improve. The comments in both categories fell into four areas of focus: 1) the learner herself, 2) the course or the performance of the instructor, 3) the writing process, or 4) the content of the material under study in the paper. Tables A and B show the number of comments in each category.

Looking at the percentages of positive versus negative comments in the affective domain, one notices several things. Among first-year women, the alleged fearfulness discussed by Greenwood and Daloz seems to be borne out. Forty-five per cent of the comments made by these students during the drafting process were affective and many of them were negative rather than positive (29% to 16%). Somewhat surprisingly, however, that

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Table A
First-year Adult Women Students
Comments while drafting paper and after paper is completed.

| Focus | Affective | | Cognitive | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Pos. | Neg. | Strategies | Needs | % |
| Learner | 17 | 34 | 12 | 11 | 74 (20%) |
| Course/Instructor | 8 | 18 | 14 | 14 | 54 (15%) |
| Writing Process | 12 | 39 | 76 | 47 | 175 (48%) |
| Content | 22 | 14 | 10 | 18 | 64 (17%) |
| Total | 59 (16%) | 105 (29%) | 112 (31%) | 90 (25%) | 366 |

Total Affective Comments: 164 (45%)
Total Cognitive Comments: 202 (55%)

First-year Students
(n=21)

Journal Response to Instructor's Comments

| Focus | Affective | | Cognitive | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Pos. | Neg. | Strategies | Needs | % |
| Learner | 20 (14) | 22 (10) | 8 (5) | 1 (1) | 51 (31%) |
| Course/Instructor | 20 (12) | 8 (7) | 11 (8) | 7 (5) | 46 (28%) |
| Writing Process | 10 (8) | 8 (6) | 21 (12) | 26 (12) | 65 (40%) |
| Content | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 1 (1) | 1 (.6%) |
| Total | 50 (31%) | 38 (23%) | 40 (24%) | 35 (21%) | 163 |

Total Affective Comments: 89 (55%)
Total Cognitive Comments: 74 (45%)

90% of Respondents made Affective Positive comments.
52% of Respondents made Affective Negative comments.
67% of Respondents made Cognitive Strategy comments.
62% of Respondents made Cognitive Needs comments.

Table B
Upper-level Adult Women Students
Comments during and after writing documented paper.

| Focus | Affective | | Cognitive | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Pos. | Neg. | Strategies | Needs | | % |
| Learner | 15 | 23 | 16 | 8 | 62 | (18%) |
| Course/Instructor | 3 | 7 | 4 | 5 | 19 | (6%) |
| Writing Process | 9 | 19 | 94 | 30 | 152 | (45%) |
| Content | 10 | 10 | 63 | 21 | 104 | (31%) |
| Total | 37 (11%) | 59 (18%) | 177 (53%) | 64 (19%) | 337 | |

Total Affective Comments: 96 (28%)
Total Cognitive Comments: 241 (72%)

Upper-level Students

(n=16)

Journal Response to Instructor's Comments

| Focus | Affective | | Cognitive | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Pos. | Neg. | Strategies | Needs | | % |
| Learner | 10 (4) | 5 (4) | 3 (2) | 2 (2) | 20 | (16%) |
| Course/Instructor | 27 (16) | 14 (6) | 9 (6) | 9 (6) | 59 | (47%) |
| Writing Process | 4 (3) | 5 (4) | 14 (9) | 11 (9) | 34 | (27%) |
| Content | 4 (1) | 1 (1) | 4 (4) | 3 (3) | 12 | (10%) |
| Total | 45 (36%) | 25 (20%) | 30 (24%) | 25 (20%) | 125 | |

Total Affective Comments: 70 (56%)
Total Cognitive Comments: 55 (44%)

100% of Respondents made Affective Positive comments.
56% of Respondents made Affective Negative comments.
75% of Respondents made Cognitive Strategy comments.
75% of Respondents made Cognitive Needs comments.

relationship changes after they have heard from their instructors: 55% of the comments were affective but were more apt to be positive than negative (31% to 23%).

Upper-level students had many fewer comments in the affective domain while drafting their papers--only 28%. Of that 28%, just as with the first-year students, comments were more apt to be negative than positive. Interestingly, the percentage of comments made after hearing from the instructor was almost identical to the first-year students in terms of affective versus cognitive. Again, the majority of the comments were positive, but not so strongly as the first-year students' responses.

Another significant numerical discrepancy was the percentage of comments focused on the content or the subject matter of the papers being written. Among the first-year students, content was worthy of mention in 17% of the comments made in the drafting process. After the first-year students hear from their instructors, however, less than 1% of the comments concern content. Among the upper level students, fully 31% of the comments in the drafting process relate to content, while only 10% of comments were content-specific in response to the instructor's remarks.

From this study, I have several conclusions. It is indeed the case that the affective aspect of learning needs to be attended to with adult women students. (It would be an interesting study to compare these results with a similar batch of male subjects.) Furthermore, reentry women, newly returned to college or starting from scratch, are not the only ones who need this sort of attention; women who have years of college benind them

also seem to indicate the importance of the affective in their learning process.

Secondly, I am struck by the apparent falling off of interest in the content of the paper after the students hear from the instructors. Upon seeing the figures, my hypothesis was that the instructor tended to comment heavily on the composition techniques--organization, grammar, documentation, etc.--rather than on the content. To test this hypothesis, I went back to a sample of 13 papers from each group and calculated the number of comments the instructor made on the paper on various writing topics, including content, and compared them to the comments made by the students after hearing from the instructor. Table C shows the results. Instructors of first-year students in a composition course made comments on the content of the paper only 4% of the time. The upper-level instructors were more attentive to this aspect (11%), but content was still not a leading category for comment.

Reflection on this point leads me to feel that focusing on content would reinforce in the student her role as an information-sharer, not just a pupil of sentence-patterns, pronoun agreement, and MLA documentation format.

Table C shows another interesting number gleaned from the 26 papers analyzed. The instructor comments which could be labeled as "positive" were totalled. First-year students received positive comments at the rate of 16% of the total number of comments. Upper-level students received 32% positive comments. The low number of positive comments given to the first-year students was surprising, especially since positive comments from students

Table C

COMPARISON OF INSTRUCTOR AND STUDENT COMMENTS RELATED TO WRITING
(n = 13 student/instructor interactions in each group)

First-year writing course:

| INSTRUCTOR | | STUDENT | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Grammar | 27% | General | 50% |
| Research | 15% | Organization | 8% |
| Style | 13% | Research | 8% |
| Editing | 10% | Grammar | 8% |
| Topic/Thesis | 7% | Topic/Thesis | 6% |
| Organization | 6% | Editing | 6% |
| Content | 4% | Style | 4% |
| Intro/Conclu. | 4% | Content | 3% |
| Total comments: 250 | | Total comments: 98 | |
| Total positive comments: 16% | | | |

Upper-level courses:

| INSTRUCTOR | | STUDENT | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Grammar | 20% | General | 42% |
| Style | 15% | Editing | 14% |
| Gen. Positive | 13% | Research | 13% |
| Research | 12% | Style | 9% |
| Content | 11% | Grammar | 8% |
| Editing | 7% | Content | 4% |
| Intro/Conclu. | 6% | Intro/Conclu. | 3% |
| Evaluation | 6% | Topic/Thesis | 2% |
| Topic | 4% | | |
| Typing | 4% | | |
| Total comments: 191 | | Total comments: 111 | |
| Total Positive Comments: 32% | | | |

responding to the instructor evaluation jumped up to 31% from the earlier 16% positive comments. Most instructors of adults know the advantages of dishing out some praise for motivational and self-esteem purposes. Adult women, however, are boosted by a minimal amount of supportive remarks; excessive encomia are not necessary. (My theory is that adult women have gotten little or no praise for the work they have done for 10 or 20 years, so <u>any</u> praise is warmly received.)

Bugbee's statement that adult learners show a wide range of needs is evident if one examines some of the specific comments made by the students in this study. In the affective realm, the first-year students often say things that indicate a lack of self-assurance and a fear of failure. "I never thought I'd get this far," and "I expected more criticism, which is natural for me" are examples. The most extreme example of a worried student is found in this comment: "I can't believe I didn't indent in the bibliography. My instructor must think I'm crazy. What a jerk of me." (Instructors do occasionally think their students are "jerks," but seldom because they do not indent bibliographies properly.)

However, apparent as well were a number of affective responses from reentry women which show considerable sophistication; for example, "I felt encouraged to assess the comments for revision according to my own perspectives, confident that my thoughts and ideas would be respected."

In the cognitive realm, some interesting comments appear. This one underscores the view of some students that writing

errors are much akin to sin, albeit venial. "There is little excuse for the errors I made though I have a better understanding of how they were committed." (Bless me, father, for I have spliced a comma.)

Not unusual were lists of cognitive approaches which the students perceived themselves as using. Here is one:

> My process is I get started; put something down; eliminate rambling; stay on topic; re-read chapters in handbook on getting started; outline; list all related topics and subtoptics; salvage the usable.

Another problem in dealing with adult students involves their willingness to expose their personal lives--a quality that many instructors find unsettling. This student comment illustrates the point: "While writing this research paper I had trouble seperating[sic] myself from the paper. Since I was sexually abused as a child many of the statements made me stop and think of many of my own feelings." In my experience, such comments can be acknowledged briefly but effectively, thus validating the student's right to express such thoughts; however no therapy session is necessary, nor is the student asking for sympathy. Adults will weave their lives into their writing and a modicum of understanding from the instructor is all they usually require.

In comparing the first-year students' comments to the upper-level students' comments, one detects a substantial rise in complexity of thought and ability to analyze. Consider these comments of upper-level students in the affective mode.

-"I enjoyed developing the ideas so having the instructor's comments come back so favorably to them was a real plus."

-"I appreciate any response from a teacher which mentions a connection between my work and what is happening in the 'real world.'"

-"It was nice to get a paper back that was not torn to shreds by a teacher's writing all over is as my Comp I teacher was prone to do. Although it's been many years and credit hours since then, the memory still stands every time I open a packet of returned work."

-"I am always relieved and <u>never</u> satisfied when I finish a paper."

On the cognitive level, these experienced students make comments which would warm the heart of the most cranky instructor.

-"I think transition is very important. I could see where I had neglected it in various places as you pointed out. If writing doesn't flow, readers become impatient."

-"Your comments reflect a genuine concern for the quality of my work and my feelings. I tremendously appreciate the fact that you don't return my assignments with all kinds of comments about how <u>you</u> would have worded a sentence, or what <u>you</u> would have added to a paragraph. When you're sitting at home writing these assignments with no dialogue with other students, that kind of 'help' can be demoralizing."

-"I wrote down all of [instructor's] corrections and will make a guide book for myself based on corrections from all my papers in Continuity and Change I [upper-level course]. I truly want to improve all of my writing skills, so welcome

corrections."

Working with adult students on their writing is usually a gratifying experience. As theorists in adult learning tell us, these students are hard-working, motivated, appreciative, and usually quite good. Their life experience tells them that developing their knowledge and skills is a necessary and worthwhile task. Instructors of these students reap the rewards of working with people who want to learn. Paying attention to the needs of these students is not so difficult; basking in their success and their pride in their work is easy indeed.

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